

## **Information Bulletin**

# **Child Labor**

Eliminating child labor is a priority if the estimated 250 million children who labor are to be given the opportunity to reach their potential. And although the causes of child labor are complex, the potential economic benefits from its elimination are considerable. The skills needed for workers to be more productive are acquired through education. If children are in school rather than working, any short-term losses to an economy will be gained back by the added economic value that comes with an educated labor force. The challenge to eliminating child labor, however, lies in the fact that it is not concentrated in identifiable, accessible sites. Instead, it is scattered in small manufacturing plants or in family-owned enterprises that are often illegal.

### **What Is Child Labor?**

Child labor is defined as work that impairs the health, disrupts the education, and violates the rights of children. According to the International Labor Organization (ILO), approximately 250 million children between the ages of five and fourteen labor worldwide. Of the estimated 250 million children working, 100 million are estimated to be girls. These numbers, however, do not include the millions of children, mostly young girls, who work as domestics--either for others or in their own households.

Ninety-nine percent of working children live in developing countries--61 percent in Asia, 32 percent in Africa, and 7 percent in Latin America. The occurrence of child labor is highest in Africa, where four out of ten children work.

### **Where Children Work: Hazardous and Exploitative Labor**

Between 75 and 80 percent of all child workers are in the agricultural sector. The rest are in industries that run the gamut from mining to brick, carpet and cigarette making. Because of poverty and economic necessity, it is not uncommon for children to be sold as bonded labor. In exchange for loans, parents pledge their children to employers.

The domestic and international sex industry is replete with girls who have been forced into the trade by parents seeking money. Besides these young girls, others are lured or tricked into the industry. The numbers are significant. The UN's Special Rapporteur on the Sale of Children has estimated that in Asia alone, one million children are involved in the sex trade. According to the ILO, children as young as ten are sex workers.

Nine out of ten children working as domestics are girls. In Indonesia alone, for example, an estimated five million girls work as domestics. These children, who can be as young as five, toil in near total isolation from family and friends; they often suffer physical, mental, and sexual abuse by employers.

## **The Social and Economic Repercussions of Child Labor**

More often than not, child labor exposes children to harsh and dangerous conditions that have long-term, debilitating effects. Children are exposed to dangerous chemicals and noxious fumes that stunt growth, and they can suffer life-threatening injuries or death from unsafe machinery. The girl-child working in the commercial sex industry is at risk of sexually transmitted diseases including HIV/AIDS, pregnancy at a young age, and maternal mortality.

Significant levels of HIV infections have been reported among sex workers in India, Myanmar, and Thailand. The escalating infection rate has increased demand for child sex workers. Recruiters now target girls as young as ten, in the belief that they will not expose customers to HIV. The results are higher HIV rates among young girls because they are more susceptible to the infection.

Child labor also reduces the potential benefits of education by decreasing attendance at school. Of the estimated 250 million children who are economically active, the ILO reports that approximately 120 million are working full time and have been forced to drop out of school entirely. For those working children who remain in school, the benefits of education are reduced. These children have less time to study and, because they are tired, retain less of what they have learned.

## **Toward Sustainable Development**

Improving sustainable economic growth in developing countries is more difficult when child labor persists. National governments, therefore, have a role to play in promoting the eradication of child labor. Efforts are being made. In Asia, for example, member governments of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation agreed in 1996 to end bonded labor by the year 2000 and to eliminate all child labor by the year 2010. Also in 1996, members of the Non-Aligned Movement agreed to give the elimination of child labor immediate attention.

Nineteen governments have joined a 1991 ILO International Program on the Elimination of Child Labor (IPEC), partially funded by the United States. One such program in Brazil includes a public awareness campaign being implemented by trade unions. The unions have also committed to securing clauses in labor contracts that bar child labor. In northern Thailand, in an effort to keep young girls from exploitation, a local non-governmental organization is offering informal education and skills training in 70 communities. At the same time, awareness programs that highlight the dangers of child prostitution are ongoing.

Creating awareness of the dangers of child labor is a key element in the ILO/IPEC programs. The message is spread through radio announcements and picture books that are distributed in areas of concentrated poverty. In India, for example, an awareness program among community members, loom owners, and children resulted in 4,500 children leaving the carpet industry. These children were placed in specially developed learning

centers. In addition to raising awareness, the ILO/IPEC programs help governments improve child labor legislation. They also train inspectors, particularly in finding invisible child laborers in the informal sector.

Countries that import goods produced by the labor of children also have a role to play in the elimination of child labor. Many, including the United States, have made commitments to stop this trade. These decisions, however, have had both a positive and negative impact on the reduction of child labor. For example, a bill proposed in the U.S. Congress in 1992 banning the importation of goods made with child labor caused panic in Bangladesh, where 60 percent of products are exported to the U.S. Although the legislation has not been passed, as many as 75,000 child workers in the garment industry, mostly young girls, were fired from their jobs in 1992. They were later found working in more hazardous jobs or as prostitutes.

UNICEF and the ILO intervened. In an agreement with the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association, approximately \$1 million was set aside for the education of the young girls who were fired. An additional 10,500 child laborers were found working in garment factories after the 1992 firings, and efforts were made to place these and the other children in educational facilities. However, by the end of 1996, only 4,000 of the child laborers were in school.

The U.S. Government, through the Department of Labor, continues to study the problem of child labor and the importation of products made by children. Under a Congressional mandate, it is currently studying international child labor practices. The Department is also reviewing efforts by U.S. importers to eliminate the importation of products made by children and to label products as child-labor free. Corporations such as Reebok, Levi Strauss, Sears, and others in the sporting goods industry have begun to look at the conditions under which imported products are made. In support of labeling efforts, USAID is providing assistance to carpet makers in Nepal.

## **Ending Child Labor**

Although the causes of child labor are complex and the solutions equally challenging, its elimination has considerable social and economic benefit. If the practice were eradicated, those children who now labor would be free to pursue their potential while developing countries would see greater long-term growth.

June 1997

*The publication is produced by the Office of Women in Development, Bureau of Global Programs, Field Support and Research, U.S. Agency for International Development  
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